Teen And Up Audiences

No Archive Warnings Apply

Gen

The LEGO Ninjago Movie (2017)
LEGO Ninjago

Lloyd Garmadon
Lord Garmadon (Ninjago)
Kai (Ninjago)
Cole (Ninjago)
Nya (Ninjago)
Zane (Ninjago)
Jay Walker
Koko
Sensei Wu (Ninjago)

Alternate Universe
Lloyd isn't good at being evil
content warning: toxic parenting
English

Son of Garmadon

orphan_account

Summary:

Lloyd is put in charge of the captured Ninja after Ninjago City falls to Lord Garmadon's army.

(AU in which movie!Lloyd is raised by his father).

Notes:

This was written in two days as a character study for my other fic, Meet Again. I'm sorry if the quality is iffy in some places.

Either way, enjoy!

(See the end of the work for more notes (#work_endnotes) .)

pt. 1: introductions

Lloyd is sixteen when the Shark Army marches through the streets of Ninjago City. Flags are planted on buildings. Dissident civilians are rounded up and tossed in temporary jails. Families stand in the middle of the hectic streets, stranded as their homes burn down around them. In the hours after the conquering, lives are ruined and lost and as Lloyd watches from atop the tallest tower he feels nothing at all.

Music thumps in his chest as his father's party ensues around him. It's a sunny afternoon, so he feels a little warm in his green zip-up hoodie, but he supposes it's nothing compared to the heat of the volcano. He keeps his eyes on the streets below, watching the Army go through the motions. This isn't the first time they've gotten this far—they've won before, only to have the Secret Ninja Force crash their party and kick them back to the volcano.

Tonight, there will be no interruptions. At this very hour, the Ninja are several miles deep in the ocean, locked in a prison beneath the volcano Lloyd called home. His father wanted to kill them. Lloyd convinced him that keeping them prisoner while everything they stood for turned to ash was a far better punishment.

It doesn't matter. Ninja dead or alive, the Army and his father are free to celebrate in peace.

This peace is not found in Lloyd. As he watches the chaos in the streets below him, he cannot shake the feeling that something is wrong. But their enemies are defeated, the city is theirs, and Lloyd has finally achieved what's been looking forward to his whole life.

So why, after reaching his ultimate goal, does he feel so empty?

The sun sets and the party goes on and Lloyd wants nothing more than to just go home.

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The mission is given to him the following month.

"I need you to do something for me," his father tells him, sipping on a cocktail through a curly straw. They are in the penthouse of Ninjago City's most expensive apartment building, appropriated from the owner to use as a temporary home while the city's construction workers get started on building his father a lair in the city. "You know those pesky little Ninja? They know the location of something I need. All of my generals are idiots and I don't think they can get it out of them, but I can trust you, right? You're pretty smart."

The idea makes him uneasy. "I don't know. I've never been very good at hurting people, and they might be dangerous, and if they can take you down I don't think I'll stand a chance against them."

Garmadon laughs. "Didn't I teach you anything about being evil? Torture is unreliable—the Ninja will just lie to get out of it. I want you to do it a little differently."

"How?"

Garmadon shrugs and talks past the straw in his mouth. "You can figure it out. Use your charm, or something."

And so marks the beginning of a very long few months.

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His father needs something called the *Ultimate Weapon.* It's the only thing that can defeat him now that he controls the city and the Ninja have been defeated. He fears that a rebellious citizen will find it and try to use it against him.

Lloyd's task is to convince the Ninja to tell him where it is and then destroy it.

At first, he struggles to find a good way to do this. Should he be their enemy? Should he be their friend? He has only seen the Ninja in battle—he doesn't know anything about who they are behind the mask.

He learns about the way his father has chosen to treat them. Their food portions are inconsistent; some days, they receive nothing, but most days, there's something to tide them over. There is also a policy involving lights. When the prison lights are on, sleeping is forbidden. His father has used this rule as an excuse to keep lights on for days at a time and shift their concepts of day and night around seven whole times before Lloyd is given the reigns.

Lloyd wonders if his father kept the depth of Lloyd's involvement in the day-to-day prison operations a secret for a reason. As soon as he agrees to find the *Ultimate Weapon,* his father gives him the key to the control room and puts him in charge of all the guards responsible for keeping the Ninja in line.

"Don't get too comfortable," Lord Garmadon says, putting the control room key in Lloyd's hands. "I have the final say in everything."

"You have veto?"

His father smiles, fangs and all. "Veto and much, much more."

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The prison is deep in the ocean, built out of a rare mineral his father calls *vengestone.* It was built to hold five occupants, so while its walls are thick and layout purposely confusing in the case of an escape, the population isn't large.

It isn't quiet, either. When Lloyd steps out of the elevator, the prisoners are loud, voices echoing off the walls as they speak through their cells. He moves through the prison, navigating quietly to listen in as he tries to find their cells in the maze of dead-end hallways that make up most of the prison. They seem to be speaking about . . . school?

"No, I'm telling you, Mrs. Jones plays favorites. She totally flunked me on purpose and now I have to take her class *again* this semester. She hates me."

A laugh. "Dude, you failed because you never handed in your homework."

"Shut up, Cole. You don't know anything."

"I sat beside you for the whole semester."

"You suck. This is why Jay is my favorite person to sit beside in school."

"Really? Thanks!"

"Don't listen to him, Jay." This voice is female. "He only likes to sit next to you because you let him copy your work."

"Is this bully Kai day? Because I feel like it's bully Kai day."

A robotic voice. "Bully Kai day is not a recognized holiday in the national calendar."

The Ninja go quiet when Lloyd rounds a corner and enters the cell block. There are four cells on each side, and one in the far wall. The block is illuminated by a single, dim light hanging from the ceiling. The interior of the cells are dark and uninviting. In the cell in the far wall, a shadowy figure looks at him through the bars.

It's cold in the block. Lloyd shivers as he approaches, rubbing his arms to warm himself up. He stops when he stands directly below the light in the middle of the cells. The Ninja stare at him and the silence becomes hostile. It's his father's prison, but he feels like an intruder here.

The Ninja in the far wall breaks the silence. Like the others, he's outside of his gi, dressed in plain, grey clothes that make it hard for Lloyd to discern his identity without the mask. But then the Ninja leans forward, and the light shines against his forehead and Lloyd can make out a scar that cuts across his face. He knows exactly who this is.

"What time is it? Please tell me you know what time it is," the Fire Ninja pleads. "I think I'm losing my mind."

A girl—the Water Ninja, he realizes—in the cell to Lloyd's right groans loudly. "Stop asking them that. They never answer you."

Lloyd pulls his phone out of his pocket and glances at the clock.

"It's eight in the morning," Lloyd tells the Red Ninja. To prove it, he turns his phone screen so the ninja can see it. "I'm surprised you're up so early. Don't high school students like to sleep in?"

The Fire Ninja points to the light. "Not allowed to sleep when that's on."

Lloyd is about to express some form of pity when the robotic voice talks from behind.

"You are the son of Lord Garmadon."

Lloyd turns to face the voice. Glowing blue eyes stare back at him. The Ice Ninja.

"My name is Lloyd," he says loudly, as though announcing it to the room. "Yes, I'm the son of Garmadon. Gonna be honest, I didn't really want any of you to know. My family ties tend to make people a little wary of me. I'm just here to introduce myself."

There's a moment of silence wherein everyone seems to process that their enemy is right before them. Lloyd isn't just a random guard or soldier. He's Garmadon's son and heir to the future empire.

The Fire Ninja doesn't just break the silence this time—he shatters it, sending the shards directly into Lloyd's heart as he doesn't just speak, but yells.

"You're a monster! You are your dad, you—you've killed so many people and ruined so many lives and I don't know __"

The Water Ninja tries to cut him off. "Kai, shut up, you're going to piss him off—"

"I don't know how you live with yourselves! I feel terrible for any collateral damage during our fights for *months,* but that's all you live for. How many people have you hurt, Garmadon? How many?"

The Fire Ninja's hands are gripping the bars now. The hatred in his eyes is something Lloyd is used to seeing in his opposition, but up close and personal, it's hard to keep his expression neutral. Especially when the Ninja's words almost ring true in his mind.

He doesn't think of himself as evil. He has simply accepted reality as it is: Garmadon on the top, everyone else on the bottom. Even as a child, he'd always seen it as inevitable. Why fight it when he could be on the winning side?

But still, it hurts a little. He struggles to keep his voice steady. "I've never killed anyone."

The Fire Ninja's only response is laughter.

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The interrogation room is close to the prison's elevator. It's a room with vengestone walls and a metal desk with two chairs on either side. One chair, the one for Lloyd, is elegant and made of suede. The other chair, the one for the prisoners, is made of uncomfortable metal.

The first Ninja the guards bring in is covered in freckles and has wandering eyes that can never seem to concentrate on one thing at a time.

Hands chained together, the Ninja sits in the chair. The guard leaves the room. As the door slams shut, Lloyd opens the notepad in front of him and writes *THE LIGHTNING NINJA* at the top of the page in messy handwriting.

"Let's start off easy," Lloyd begins. "What's your name?"

The Lightning Ninja sucks in a deep breath. "Jay Walker."

Lloyd notices the Ninja bouncing his leg under the table. It's incessant. He doesn't mention it. "Age?"

"Sixteen." A pause. "Do I get a phone call?"

Lloyd has to stop writing to process the question. "You want a phone call? You don't have rights in here. You're an enemy of the state."

"Oh." The Lightning Ninja's eyes finally settle and he stares at his lap. He fidgets with the hem of his shirt. Lloyd has always known the Lightning Ninja is the shortest of the Ninja, but he looks small, now. Like a lost child. "I just want to call

my parents. They don't even let me go outside past dinnertime. I think they must be freaking out if they're still—" a hiccup "—if they're still alive. I want to let them know I'm okay. I don't want them to think I'm dead. It must be killing them."

Lloyd doesn't let himself feel anything. But even if there is no sympathy present in his heart, he lets Jay—no, the Lightning Ninja—go without asking any further questions.

He justifies the lack of progress by telling himself that someone hung up on the outside world will never adjust to a life in a stone basement. The Lightning Ninja will need to let go before Lloyd may continue. And he has an idea of what he can do.

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The next Ninja has shaggy black hair and thick, dark eyebrows. There's a nonchalant way he carries himself, but Lloyd can see a certain alertness in his gaze. When he sits in the chair, he uses his fingers to tap out an inaudible beat on the edge of the table.

Music. Untamed hair. This is the Earth Ninja.

His name is Cole. Sixteen, like the Lightning Ninja. Lloyd is able to get a little more out of him than the others. But there's something about him that puts Lloyd off. He appears aloof at times, perhaps uncaring. But his answers are careful and take time to leave his lips and it makes Lloyd wonder if there's something hidden in his demeanor.

"Well, I became a Ninja at the same time as the others. I was recruited by Wu, built a sweet mech, dropped a mixtape, fought evil, all that jazz. I haven't really been doing a lot lately." He shrugs. "I guess I've become a bit of a basement dweller."

Lloyd frowns. "Want to go into a little more detail?"

The Earth Ninja is slouched in his chair, feet up on the table. He shifts a little and smiles. "Sure. My mixtape is called 'C Major', kind of a pun on my name. It has seven tracks, all original beats by yours truly. You should listen to the beat progression on track five. It's pretty fire. And if you like indie music, I got a pretty popular underground singer to collab with me on the last track. We were thinking of making a music video and got a studio to sign onto it and everything. But, uh, then the attack happened and I got a little sidetracked. Will music still be a thing under Garmadon or is he banning it?"

Lloyd puts his pen down. "Why would he ban music?"

"I don't know. It's like, freedom of expression. What if someone makes a song about how Garmy sucks? What will you do then?"

"I'll be honest with you," Lloyd begins. "I don't know that much about what he's planning. I'm not a general of the Army. I'm just his kid."

For a moment, a look of surprise passes the Earth Ninja's face. "Then why are you hosting these pseudo job interviews with us? Wouldn't the interrogation of prisoners be a serious job for high-ranking personnel?"

The question throws Lloyd for a loop. "Are you just pretending to be stupid?"

"I'm not dumb. I just don't care."

"You should care."

"Why? Helping you won't get me anything." He rolls his eyes. "I assume we're all still alive for a reason. Do you expect me to believe that Garmadon keeps prisoners as dangerous as us because he values human life? Nah. He wants something from us. You're just his little messenger."

Lloyd clenches his fist beneath the table. "You don't know what you're talking about. You're alive because we chose to imprison you instead. And I'm not my dad's messenger. I'm here because he chose me to carry out these interrogations."

The Earth Ninja puts his feet down. Leans forward. "My dad is bossy, too. I get it. You don't have to lie to me."

Lloyd sends his second Ninja back to their cell early. This time, he tells himself that arguing with someone who doesn't understand what's going on around them isn't worth his time.

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The Water Ninja is the easiest one to deal with. She tells him her name, age, why she became a Ninja, and even a little about her life story when Lloyd asks her to tell him about herself.

Her name is Nya, she's sixteen, she became a Ninja when she and her brother were approached by Wu, and she lives in foster care with the Fire Ninja.

"I have a sick bike, too," she says. "I painted Lady Iron Dragon on it. She's my idol."

Lloyd doesn't look up as he writes. "My dad hates her. She used to try to stop him, back in the day."

The Water Ninja rests her chin in her hands. "What an icon."

He chooses not to refute her. If she's willing to be cooperative, he needs to keep asking the real questions.

He clears his throat. The Water Ninja exits her idol-induced daze and looks up to him. "Where's the Ultimate Weapon?"

"With Wu, probably," she says. "I think he was the last person that had it."

"Where's Wu?"

She ponders this for a moment. "He's pretty mysterious. I'm not even sure where I would start looking. Maybe on the shoreline? He used to live in a boat."

"You have no idea?" Lloyd asks. There's disappointment in his voice.

"He never told us anything. Probably for this reason," she says. "But can I be honest with you? I think something was a little wrong with him."

Lloyd sits up straighter in his chair. "What do you mean?"

She leans in and whispers, as though sharing a secret. "He said our world is wrong. There's some kind of dead prophecy he always talked to us about. It's something about six ninja that will protect Ninjago City. But there's only five of us. He thought we were in a bad timeline. Now that your dad's won, I sometimes wonder if he's right. Maybe this is a failed timeline. Maybe, if we had six members, none of this would have happened."

He shakes his head to subdue a laugh. Worlds can't be *wrong.* They just *are*.

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The interrogation room is silent. Across from Lloyd, the Ice Ninja stares him in the eye, unblinking. He hasn't moved since he sat down. Until now, Lloyd never suspected he could feel this uncomfortable.

He finally breaks away from the Ice Ninja's gaze and tries to speak. "What's your na—"

The Ice Ninja talks over him. "You have never killed anyone."

"What?"

"You were not wrong in your statement before. Your father and the Shark Army are responsible for the deaths of many people, but when I review previously-downloaded statistics on Garmadon attacks, no casualties fall under your name." His expression does not change. "I find this intriguing. You are the son of an aspiring dictator, yet you have never hurt anyone. Why not?"

Lloyd swallows. "I'm not the one being interrogated here."

The Ice Ninja rests his hands on his lap. "You are correct, my apologies. My name is Zane Julien. I am arguably sixteen. My parents love me but do not understand my teenage tendencies. Wu trained me to become a Ninja. I am not sure what else I can tell you. Although I am a Ninja, my life is quite ordinary."

"Where's Wu?"

"If you have not caught him by now, you never will. He is quite mysterious."

Lloyd throws his head back. "This is impossible."

"Whoever is in charge of you should make new questions," the Ice Ninja says. "If you want to find Wu, asking someone who has only seen prison walls for a month is probably a bad idea. You should ask someone on the surface. Maybe then you will find someone who has seen him."

"Don't help me!" Lloyd exclaims. "You're supposed to hate me. You're my prisoner, remember?"

The Ice Ninja blinks for the first time.

"I could be wrong, but I assumed we were one and the same. It is hard to imagine the son of Garmadon has many freedoms in life."

He doesn't. But even if he did, it's easier to go along with whatever his father says than to do things his own way. His father doesn't appreciate resistance from anyone, let alone his son. He's seen enough generals blown out of the volcano to know that you pay a hefty price when you oppose his father.

But that doesn't mean Lloyd is a prisoner. And now that Ninjago City is under his father's control, he has a feeling that he now has more freedom than the average citizen. Especially more than someone like the Ice Ninja.

"You don't know what you're talking about. You can leave."

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The Fire Ninja fights with the guards on the way into the room. Lloyd can hear them make their way down the hall, a chorus of yelling, tussling, and the odd *bang!* when something—or someone—hits a wall.

The door is thrown open. Three guards carry in the Fire Ninja. He kicks against them, struggling to escape their grasps until they finally let go and set him free into the room.

Lloyd meets eyes with one of the guards and nods. They can leave him alone with the Ninja. He doesn't need protection.

The guard nods back, motions to the other guards to leave, and then shuts the door behind him.

The silence with the Ice Ninja was uncomfortable. This time, it feels explosive. Lloyd knows he can handle himself in a fight—a gun strapped to his leg assures him of this—but he's afraid to speak. He's afraid that any word, be it a mere *hello* or *sorry*, will set the room afire. He can't bring himself to potentially set off a spark.

The Fire Ninja does it for him. But to his surprise, the Ninja speaks calmly and the room doesn't explode into a million pieces.

"I'm not saying anything to you," the Fire Ninja tells him. "Don't even bother."

Seeking to keep the peace, he says, "I'm sorry about the light."

The intensity in the Ninja's eyes doesn't die, but Lloyd sees it falter. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not really in charge here. I don't really know what's going on, whether it's the surface or this prison," he says. "My dad doesn't tell me anything. I don't think he trusts me very much. You know, before we first attacked, he wanted to kill you, and it took me so long to convince him not to because wouldn't keeping you alive while your city burns be so much better? But I know it will only get boring after a while and then the only thing left to do is—"

Lloyd cuts himself off. He doesn't know what his father plans to do with the Ninja when they locate the Ultimate Weapon. Will he keep them in this prison forever? Or will he dispose of them? Either thought weighs deeply in his stomach.

He isn't supposed to feel anything at all. No, that's wrong. He isn't supposed to feel anything but *contempt* while dealing with the Ninja. But when he looks in the Fire Ninja's eyes and sees what he thinks may be a flash of fear, Lloyd thinks of a little boy trained to fight against forces much greater than him. He thinks of little kids forced to act as soldiers in a conflict between two brothers.

The Fire Ninja's words drip with dread. Long gone is the anger that inspired him to confront Lloyd in the block. "Is he going to kill us?"

Lloyd realizes, then, that he cannot answer the question.

"I don't know," he says quietly.

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Lloyd makes some changes when the interrogations are finished.

The lights will develop a regular schedule, allowing the Ninja enough time to rest at night. Food will become consistent, healthy, and to be anticipated each day.

But the next morning, when he wakes up, he checks the security cameras of the prison to see that his father has gone above his head to make his own changes.

Four new cells have been built in separate corners of the prison. The cells are out of view of each other. They will need to shout to makes their voices heard. It doesn't take long for him to understand that whatever solace the Ninja held in being close to each other will soon be gone.

Lloyd watches on the cameras as all but Kai are removed from the block. Although the lights are turned off, no Ninja sleeps that night.

It's strange. They've only been apart for a few hours, yet it seems like they already miss each other.

He thinks of how his father hasn't contacted him since giving him the mission, and with a scowl on his face, crawls into bed late in the night with a weird ache in his chest.

As he falls asleep, he feels a flare of rebellion within him. If his father is going to make changes without telling him, Lloyd will do the same to him.

Until now, he's been neutral with the Ninja.

Now it's time to become their friend.

xxx

pt. 2: a few gifts

A week later, a blindfold is tied around the Lightning Ninja's eyes and he's brought up to the surface. During their capture, the Ninja were blindfolded before being brought to the prison, so even if they got a message out to Wu or another ally, they wouldn't be able to tell them where they were so they could be rescued. It was a stroke of genius that makes it a little hard for Lloyd to now do what he wants to with the Lightning Ninja.

It's a warm day outside. The sun is shining. A light breeze flows off the ocean. Lloyd wrinkles his nose at the overwhelming smell of salt. After living indoors for more than a month, he doesn't know how he ever tolerated it while growing up on the island.

He leads the Lightning Ninja to the ashen beach. The previous night, he had a guard travel to the city and purchase a flip phone and install the cheapest cell plan on it. He holds it in his hand, now. It feels awkward to punch in the numbers the Ninja gives him after using a smartphone for so many years.

The phone begins to ring. Lloyd passes it to the Lightning Ninja and takes a few steps back. It feels wrong to be so close while it happens.

Lloyd hears the other line pick up.

Jay speaks through a hand clasped over his mouth.

"Mom? Mom, is that you? . . . No, don't put me on speaker phone, you're going to make me cry . . ."

Lloyd stares at the city across the water. Muffled words make their way to him from the phone. He hears things like *we love you, we hope you know that* and *we're all going to make it through this together* and *please don't cry, we just want to hear you laugh again*.

The call ends and the only thing Lloyd can hear is the sound of sniffling and waves crashing against the shore.

The blindfold is stained with tears. On the way down on the elevator, Jay tries to give back the phone. Lloyd tells him to keep it.

"There's no cell service so deep down," he tells him, "but I'll see if I can smuggle you up again. Hold onto the phone for now. I have no need for it."

The elevator reaches the basement floor with a *ding* and the last thing Lloyd expects is a hug.

It's over as quick as it begins.

In a broken voice, Jay whispers to him,

"Thank you."

xxx

The cell phone isn't the only thing Lloyd had a guard bring him the previous night.

It wasn't hard to find Cole's address once he knew his name. The guard entered the apartment and ignored the pleas of a mourning father as he rummaged through Cole's personal belongings, digging in drawers and coat pockets until he found what Lloyd wanted. He left without saying a word. He didn't need to—everything in Ninjago City is now Garmadon's property, rendering Cole's father useless to fight the will of an Army soldier.

Lloyd plays with a coin in his pocket as he waits for the Earth Ninja to come to the interrogation room. He doesn't know why he's so fidgety. He blames a certain level of emotional exhaustion from dealing with Jay this morning. Lloyd isn't one to get anxious. Not for a prisoner. Why would he care if the Earth Ninja likes his gift or not?

The steel door opens. The Earth Ninja steps inside. As the door closes behind him, he stares at Lloyd quizzically.

"Where's your notebook?" he asks. "I thought this was an interrogation. Should I be worried?"

Lloyd takes his hands out of his pockets and rubs the sweat off on his pants. "I listened to your mixtape," he admits. "Headphones give me headaches, so I don't listen to a lot of music, but I really liked it. The third song is my favorite."

The Earth Ninja rolls his eyes. "You and every edgy kid in this city. Is that why you made me come here?"

"Uh, no. I brought you something."

There's a small plastic bag next to Lloyd's chair. He pulls it up and up-ends it on the table.

A smartphone—its SIM card removed and all apps deleted—clatters against the table. A pair of expensive headphones and a phone charger tumble out after it.

The Earth Ninja hurries to the table and picks up the phone. He swipes his thumb on the home button. It unlocks.

The only thing it can do is play music. But still, Cole smiles as he scrolls through his music library. "You brought this here for me?"

"I'm trying to be nice."

"Do I get to keep it?"

"The guards will take it away at night and charge it. Try to preserve the battery throughout the day," Lloyd warns him. "There's no outlet in your cell."

Cole puts the headphones around his neck and takes the charger. Without being formally excused, he backs away towards the door, a large grin still on his face.

He points to Lloyd in a way that almost feels brotherly.

"You're my new best friend, kid. My next mixtape's gonna be about you!"

Something bubbles inside him and Lloyd suppresses a laugh with his hand as Cole walks out the door.

xxx

The Lady Iron Dragon, although real, has become something of an urban legend in Ninjago city.

Most versions of the story goes as follows: the Lady Iron Dragon meets Lord Garmadon in a warzone outside the city, they fall in love over their shared love of violence, and then she leaves him upon discovering Ninjago City to pursue a normal life. It's believed that since leaving Garmadon, she's blended in with the crowds of the city and no one has identified her as the Lady Iron Dragon since.

His father knows she's out there. Lloyd has wondered if the Iron Dragon has anything to do with his father's obsession with Ninjago City in the past, and once, he even asked during one of their uncommon 'family' dinners.

His father wasn't very happy and Lloyd quickly learned to never bring it up again.

A phone call and music-playing cell phone seem like nothing when he hands over a painting kit and cheap canvas to the Water Ninja. If anything will get him in trouble, it's telling a Ninja that if it'll make her happy, she can make a picture of the Lady Iron Dragon to put in her cell.

But when she gets the painting kit, she laughs in a way that rings with disbelief.

"Oh my goodness. This is so funny," she says.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I'm not good at art. I paid a kid in our class to paint my bike for me."

The world freezes around him as he realizes the mistake he's made. "Oh."

Nya laughs again and rubs his shoulder. "Who cares if I'm not good at art? Let's paint it together. You and me."

He takes her up on the offer. They spend two hours painting the Lady Iron Dragon, referencing a picture from Lloyd's phone and doing their best to copy it. When it's finished, the proportions are wrong and the colours are bad and it doesn't look much like the original but it makes Nya laugh so even if it's not what he hoped it would be, he supposes it's worth it all the same.

She keeps the painting so she can bring it to her cell. On her way out the door with a guard, she says to him, "I can't wait to show this to everyone when we get out of here. Kai will love it."

When they get out of here. Is she alone in this idea, or do all the Ninja believe this is temporary? Do they imagine escaping and defeating Garmadon? Do they imagine he will pardon them and grant them freedom?

It's too optimistic. His father will never let it happen.

He doesn't linger on it for too long. It scares him when he realizes that if he saw them escaping, he doesn't know if he would do anything to stop them.

Whatever. He has work to do.

xxx

Getting Your Parents to Understand You: A Guide for Undervalued Teenagers.

The book is several hundred pages long. Lloyd read the first few pages previous night, but it seemed so trivial that he put it down and only picked it back up again to bring to the interrogation room. He doesn't need to know how to introduce his parents to his friends or ask for a later curfew. When he read it, it seemed otherworldly—almost unimaginable. He doesn't have friends, or a curfew, and he certainly isn't going to pick arguments with his father now that he's the dictator of a once free world.

Is it wrong to say it felt below him? *Yes*, he thinks, trying to put his finger on the right word. And then he figures it out.

The life of a normal—does that even exist?—teenager isn't below him.

It's above him.

The Ice Ninja laughs when Lloyd gives him the book. "I do not see much of a point of reading this anymore, but just in case I get to see my parents again, I will read it."

The gift seems shallow, now. At least Jay was able to speak to his parents—this just seems like an attempt at mockery.

"I'm sorry. I didn't really think this one through," Lloyd apologizes. He stares at his lap. "I'm just mad at my dad. I thought being nice to you would be a good way to get back at him for going over my head. Is that petty?"

"Yes. But I assume it is also justified."

Lloyd looks up. There's a soft gaze on Zane's face that he can't quite place. Is it pity? No, it's something else. It's compassion. Sympathy. He looks at Lloyd the way a friend looks at another friend while they tell a sad story.

"Why are you all so nice to me?" he blurts out.

He doesn't have time to regret it before Zane speaks.

"We talked on that first night, after our interrogations," Zane says. "We all imagined you would be cruel like your father. You surprised us. In a good way. That night, we all realized that we're not too different. Who are you but a version of us grown up on the other side?"

"The other side of what?" Lloyd asks. "The ocean?"

"Morality."

He feels defensive. "That's subjective."

"Do you mean to tell me that your father is not evil?"

"He's just—he's doing what he thinks is right. He's the hero of his own story, or however the expression goes."

"Do *you* feel like a hero?"

His chair scrapes as he stands up. "Do you want to know why I can't kill anyone?" Lloyd demands. Anger is sharp in his voice. "It scares me. Hurting people scares me. I know that if someone attacked me, I would fight back, but I can't lift a finger against someone that's done nothing wrong. And it's not because I'm a good person. I'm just scared that if I do it once, I have my dad's blood in me, and I won't be able to stop. I'm afraid that I'll be like him."

"Then why are you still here?"

Lloyd gestures to the wall. "It's better than being out there with everyone else. It's better than being you! I can go outside, I get to eat and sleep whenever I want—even if my dad's an asshole, I feel a million times more liberated than anyone else right now."

Zane stands up, too. He clutches the book to his chest and nods. "This has been insightful. Thank you."

He walks out the door and leaves Lloyd alone in a room with anger burning in his heart.

xxx

Moments later, a guard enters the room with the Fire Ninja.

The fury inside Lloyd hasn't died. He reaches inside a bag next to his suede chair and retrieves the gift he got for the Fire Ninja—a fluffy pillow to help him sleep—and throws it at him.

"Get out!" he yells. The shocked, almost scared look on Ninja's face isn't enough to make him stop. "Go back to your cell and stay there for the rest of your life!"

It takes two months for the anger to fade.

xxx

pt 3. final goodbye

At home, he kills the camera feed and ignores phone calls from his father in favor of isolation. He locks himself in his room and hopes that being alone will make him feel better.

But then he looks around a realizes how *plain* his room is. He has no family photos, no birthday cards from friends, no toys, or books, or video games, or yearbooks from school. The wooden desk pushed against his wall has gone unused for most of his life, no homework or projects to ever justify using it. His walls are barren. His window overlooks the sea, no city in sight.

He chose to come here. But he's never felt so lonely.

xxx

He takes a walk through Ninjago City. Before the invasion, he remembers it as a lively, busy place that was always sunny. Now it's quiet and its streets are empty.

A family shuts their blinds as he passes by their home. Across the street, a group of soldiers from the Army laugh amongst themselves as they eat food out of takeout containers. Lloyd pulls up his hood to hide his face and keeps walking down the sidewalk.

Ninjago City's high school is located a few blocks away from the heart of downtown. On the steps leading up the main entrance, there are pictures of students and candles and wilting flowers. Lloyd makes his way up the steps, looking at the photos of unfamiliar faces, some old, some young. There are so many. He can feel the loss of life in his *soul.*

He's about to leave when he comes across pictures of people he recognizes.

The Ninja smile awkwardly in their school photos. There's an air of innocence to the photos, and if he didn't already know they were Ninja, he would assume they were normal students just like everyone else.

"Who are you? I've never seen you before," says a voice from behind.

Lloyd turns around. A teenager with light brown hair, jeans, and a *Ninjago High* varsity jacket stands at the bottom of the stairs.

"I didn't go here," Lloyd replies.

"Homeschooled, huh?" the teenager asks. He climbs up the stairs and stands beside Lloyd. "You know anyone here?"

Lloyd gestures to the Ninja. "Them."

The teenager laughs. "Ah, I remember them. The Dork Squad."

"The what?"

"They were just the lame kids at school," the teenager says. "I guess Nya was pretty cool. I don't really know why she hung out with them."

"Should you really be saying this about them after they died?" Lloyd asks.

"Probably not." The teenager shrugs. "Maybe it's just easier to talk about them like they're still alive. School went out of session a few weeks ago. I don't think it's going to open again anytime soon." The teenager kneels down and picks up one of the wilting flowers. Its petals are brown, and when he squeezes them, they crumble away in flakes. "My mom doesn't like it when I go outside. She doesn't even know I'm here right now. I just find it hard to stay away. I hated most of these kids when we were in school, but now I kind of miss them. Is that weird? We'll never see each other again after this, so don't be afraid to be honest."

"I don't think it's weird. But I wouldn't really know. I've never really had classmates or friends."

"Yeah. You look like the type."

Lloyd stares at the kid. He notices a name printed on the sleeve of his jacket: *Chen.*

They go quiet. Standing in a graveyard full of students, Lloyd thinks of what Nya told him the first time they met and wonders if it's really true.

This is a bad timeline.

Lloyd pulls out his phone. He hands it to Chen.

"Can I have your number?"

xxx

It takes a month for the dust to settle.

His father is evil.

Ninjago City never should have fallen under his control.

The Ninja aren't the bad guys.

Lloyd isn't a hero.

He never intends to be one.

But that doesn't mean he can't do something right for a change.

xxx

"You've been gone for a long time," Jay says in the elevator. The blindfold is tied tightly around his eyes. He doesn't seem to mind. "Where'd you go?"

"I had business to take care of," Lloyd replies.

"We missed you. Well, I certainly did. I don't know about the others. I haven't talked to them in a really long time."

Lloyd doesn't reply. They step out of the elevator and onto the beach, where they return to the edge of the water. Lloyd positions Jay so he doesn't face Ninjago City, but the volcano behind him.

He takes the flip phone from Jay and punches in the number. He hands it back to Lloyd and stays close so he can hear.

"Mom?"

"*Uh, hello? Who is this?"*

Jay freezes. "Chen?"

"*Wait . . . Jay?"*

Lloyd reaches forward and yanks the blindfold off of Jay's face.

The Ninja's eyes widen. He stumbles over his words as he speaks in a hurry.

"I'm at the volcano! Me and the other Ninja, we're locked under the volcano in a prison and—"

Lloyd punches the phone into the side of Jay's head. The phone cracks in two and Jay falls into Lloyd's arms.

In the prison, Lloyd throws Jay into his cell with feigned anger and slams the door. The Lightning Ninja has just begun to regain consciousness when Lloyd walks away, broken phone in hand.

xxx

From: dad

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A phone call follows suit. Lloyd picks up this time.

"*A kid vandalized a memorial at the high school. Do you see that, Lloyd? It says: 'Ninja are alive! Check prison below volcano'. Now, the whole city is talking about it. How could he have found out about this?"*

"It was my fault. I wanted to let the Lightning Ninja call his parents, but he called a friend from school instead. He took off his blindfold to tell him where he is. I did my best to stop it. I even punched him in the face. You should see the cut above his ear—it's pretty epic."

"*This is* not *epic! What if Wu finds out where they are? There are too many liabilities for this to be brushed off so easily."*

"Come on, Dad. You have the whole city under your control. I'm sure you can fight off an old man."

He hangs up before his dad can respond.

xxx

When Lloyd was seven years-old, his father experimented with a false alarm system. Ninjago City has automated alarms and announcements in the case of Garmadon attacks, so his father tried to take advantage of this by blaring random alarms from the volcano speakers to send the city into hiding even when he wasn't planning to attack. The next time he actually brought his Army over, the city had become so used to false alarms that they didn't try to find safety at first and the Secret Ninja Force only arrived to stop him thirty minutes later than usual.

His father hasn't touched the false alarm system in a long time. It's time to give it a little life again.

Cole listens to his music too loudly. Lloyd stands outside his cell, trying to get his attention by yelling, but the Earth Ninja is too preoccupied with whatever is playing through his headphones that he doesn't hear him.

Lloyd settles on taking off his boot and chucking it at the Ninja. He yelps and whips his head up to face Lloyd. He takes off his headphones. "What do you want?"

"How much battery do you have left?"

"Eight percent."

"Give me your phone."

Lloyd uses the key his father gave him to enter the control room. It's a large room full of machinery, computers, and half-finished mechs. He never liked being here. It's always reeked of bad intentions and motor oil.

On the central computer, he boots up the false alarm program. An error message flashes at him on the screen.

AUDIO SOURCE REQUIRED

He turns on Cole's bluetooth settings.

CONNECT "COLE'S MOBILE PHONE"?

He selects 'okay' and then hears the faint *boop!* of the computer announcing its connection. Lloyd scrolls through Cole's music library until he finds his mixtape.

He turns the volume all the way up to max and hits play.

The whole volcano shakes as the bass of the first track begins to play.

xxx

Lloyd takes the master set of keys down to the cells blocks. On his way out of the elevator, he leaves a broken piece of mech from the control room in the path of the elevator doors, preventing them from closing and going back up to the surface. He doesn't want more guards coming down here.

Especially not when he's unlocking the Ninja's cells and setting them free.

The first cell he comes across is the Fire Ninja's. The way the Ninja greets him reminds him of their first meeting; hands on the bars, and screaming at him to explain himself.

"What are you doing? What's going on?" the Fire Ninja yells. Lloyd can barely hear him over the music. "Your dad's gonna think we're the ones playing the music. He's gonna kill us!"

"He was probably going to kill you either way," Lloyd says to him as he tests out the keys to see which one will open the Fire Ninja's cell. "This is a signal. I'm trying to get him to come here."

"Garmadon? Are you kidding?"

He finds the key that works. The door swings open.

"No, not him. I'm talking about Wu."

He offers his hand.

Kai takes it.

xxx

As Lloyd liberates the other Ninja cell-by-cell, Kai makes his way through the prison grounds to take down any guards he can find. Lloyd frees Nya, then Cole, then Jay, and finally, Zane.

Zane smiles as he steps out of his cell. "I knew you weren't evil. What is that expression people use? 'I told you so'?"

Lloyd puts a finger to Zane's lips. They're weirdly cold. "Shh. Now is not the time."

They meet up with Kai at the elevator. There's a pile of unconscious guards on the ground and a happy grin on Kai's face.

"I've dreamt about this for so long," he says as they arrive. "This is the best day of my life."

Together, they get into the elevator and Lloyd hits the button for the surface. He kicks the mech part out of the way and the doors close and the elevator whirrs as it brings them up.

xxx

When the reach the top, they hear a loud, robotic warning:

"**BATTERY INSUFFICIENT."**

The music cuts out and the silence is deafening. Slowly, Lloyd and the Ninja step out of the elevator and into the main volcano base. There are soldiers all over the ground, lifeless. Arrows sticks out of their bodies.

They stay quiet as they make their way onto the beach. They all fall still when they hear laughter on the sand.

"You've still got that spark in you, Koko. Where have you been all these years?"

It's his father.

He's on his knees. A few metres away stands the Lady Iron Dragon, bow in hand and arrow aimed at Garmadon's chest.

"Where is he?" the Lady Iron Dragon demands. She takes a step forward. Garmadon shuffles back.

"I think he's over there." Garmadon nods to where Lloyd and the Ninja are standing.

The Lady Iron Dragon turns to him. Her eyes soften and her bow goes slack.

"Lloyd?" she breathes.

Nya and Kai step in front of Lloyd protectively. The Lady Iron Dragon's eyes harden again and she draws her bowstring. But instead of Garmadon, she points it at the Ninja.

Her voice is commanding. "Let go of my son."

Waves crash against the shore. Seagulls caw as they fly over head. Garmadon laughs loudly.

"Ah, this is too good!" he exclaims. "Lloyd, meet your mom. Koko, meet Lloyd. Do me a favor and kill his friends. They've been a bad influence on him."

The Lady Iron Dragon locks eyes with Lloyd. In this small moment, it's all the communication they need.

The Lady Iron Dragon points her arrow at Garmadon again. "You're the bad influence. I should have never left him with you."

"Sixteen years too late, Koko. Get with the times. Lloyd isn't a hero. He's just a kid that does whatever his dad tells him to. Right, Lloyd?"

And then, a foghorn blares around them and a wooden ship descends from the clouds. An old man in white robes stands on the edge as the ship lowers to the sea.

The Ninja cheer. "Master Wu!"

"Come on, Ninja!" Wu calls to them. "We must go before the Shark Army rises again."

The Lady Iron Dragon spins around and points her arrow to the Ninja again.

"No!" she yells. "You don't get to take him. I'm not losing him again."

"Koko!" Wu yells from the ship. "Lloyd must go with the Ninja. He can help us defeat Garmadon!"

Lloyd hears his father laugh again and it's too much. He's tired of someone else having control of him. He's tired of other people deciding if he's good or bad. He's tired of being held prisoner to the will of those around him.

He's done being the Son of Garmadon.

He pushes past Kai and Nya. He walks towards his mother, slowly, with his arms up in surrender. She lowers her bow as he approaches and then drops it onto the sand. She runs to close the gap between them and envelops him in a tight hug.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers into his ear. "I'm so, so sorry. This is all my fault. I should have been there for you. I should have made you dumplings on your birthday, and held your hand on your first day of school, and I should have made sure you grew up with friends and people that loved you. But you're here instead and I—I failed you. I'm so sorry, Lloyd."

Lloyd hugs her back. "We can still do those things. You, me, and the Ninja. Come with us."

"Okay, then. Let's go."

Koko picks up her bow and aims another arrow at Garmadon, keeping him in place as the Ninja climb onto the ship and help Lloyd up safely. She climbs up last and when everyone is on the deck of the ship, they take off towards the jungle.

xxx

It takes a long time for Lloyd to become accustomed to being a Ninja.

He gets used to waking up surrounded by other people. He gets used to laughing and doing things just because they're *fun* and he spends time with a parent who cares about him. He gets used to having people be there for him when he's sad—gets used to having friends and family rub his back and tell him everything is going to be okay when he cries. He cries a lot. Sometimes it feels like it's over nothing at all but after a few months, he cries less and smiles more and understands that he had too much bottled up inside and he had to drain the swamp eventually.

As they train to take back the city from Garmadon, Cole makes him listen to his new music—he's actually lived up to his promise and made a song about Lloyd—and he builds a set of headphones that don't give Lloyd headaches so he can listen to music whenever he pleases. Nya and Lloyd start drawing a comic in their free time and by the time training is over, it's two hundred pages long and almost completely illegible because of how bad the art is.

Kai spends a lot of time teaching Lloyd to fight. They practice among the bamboo stocks and Kai is so much kinder and gentler and *encouraging* than his father ever was when he tried to teach Lloyd to hurt other people. But Kai isn't teaching him to hurt people. He's teaching him how to protect others.

The time comes when Lloyd is ready and the Ninja set out on Destiny's Bounty to take back Ninjago City from his father.

xxx

They win. Ninjago City is liberated and there aren't just parties on the tallest tower but in the streets, where music plays and people laugh and the sun shines down warmly on all of them.

Lloyd goes to school for the first time. He feels like a bit of a celebrity, hanging out with the Ninja that are no longer seen as dorks but revered as heros. But Lloyd doesn't know anything about math or science or social studies, so Jay convinces his parents to let him stay out after school every day and help Lloyd catch up on everything he's missed. They spend afternoons together in Lloyd and Koko's apartment, eating snacks and drinking soda and getting frustrated whenever a math problem is too hard for either of them to solve.

He only shares his lunch break with Zane, so they find an empty classroom to eat in each time and gossip about the other students in their classes. Sometimes, Zane spends the whole hour complaining about his parents in a way that makes it seem like they're fax machines. Zane doesn't comment and goes quiet when Lloyd jokingly asks if that's the truth.

On his seventeenth birthday, his mom makes him dumplings and his friends come over for a party. It turns into a sleepover and they pile onto Lloyd's bed after stuffing themselves with birthday cake.

They don't move and spend the night like this, and Lloyd falls asleep surrounded by people he trusts and loves and he knows he's ready to finally live his life.

xxx

end.

Notes:

Thanks for reading if you made it this far! I appreciate it!

Close (#)